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ABSTRACT

Conflict almost necessarily results from change on the part of one or both participants in a relationship. Four levels at which interaction may lead to conflict are disagreement, misunderstanding, feeling misunderstood, and failure of realization of understanding. Conflict may take place when the issue is directly salient to one partner but only indirectly salient to the other, when both parties are directly involved but the situation is external to the relationship, and when the relationship itself is at issue. Two modes of expression properly used can help conflict be negotiated: the expressor mode, expressing what one is feeling or thinking about an issue, and the empathic mode, allowing the other person to do the same. In the expressor mode, people should own their own perceptions, identify their feelings, state positive aspects of the situation, describe the situation in behavioral terms, and describe desired behavior. Skills needed in the empathic mode include not asking questions, not presenting a person's own perceptions, not interpreting, not making suggestions, and not making judgments. A person may be a facilitator by teaching the skills of the two modes to others after being trained. (TJ)

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A Skills Approach to Negotiating Conflict in Relationships

A paper presented on November 24, 1978 at the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Kansas City.

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As a result of change on the part of one or both participants in a dyadic relationship, conflict almost necessarily results. As one partner's view of self and environment changes, as the saliency of certain needs alters, one's view of the relationship with the other takes on different perspectives. It may no longer be viewed as fulfilling or growthful and may even be thought of as harmful and stifling. Such changes in interpersonal perspectives need not necessarily lead to termination of the relationship, however, if these changes can be accurately communicated to the other. It may be possible for the two participants together to redesign the relationship so that it suits the needs and desires of both and consequently leads to a continuation of intimacy.

Talking about communicating and actually communicating are greatly different issues. Most persons involved in stagnating relationships would readily admit a need for better communication but most are at a loss as to how to go about achieving it. The problem is one of "what do I do?" The answer is not a simple one by any means. It involves an understanding of the exact nature of the conflict, it involves an attitude of openness and willingness to allow the other person involved to participate in the negotiation actively, and finally it requires that one can express one's feelings, perceptions, and experiences in such a manner as to communicate understanding and openness.

The Nature of the Conflict

Laing has identified four levels at which interaction with another may lead to conflict. These are disagreement, misunderstanding, feeling

misunderstood, and failure of realization of understanding. They are explained below.

1. Disagreement This results when one person's view of an issue, of self, or of other does not match the other person's view of an issue, of the first person, or of self respectively. In other words, does each view the subject of the conflict in the same way?
2. Misunderstanding When one person in the dyad compares his/her view of an issue, of self, or of other to the other person's view of the first persons's view and finds they are not the same, this is misunderstanding. In other words, does the other person know how you see things?
3. Feeling Misunderstood When one person compares his view of an issue, self, or other to what he thinks is the other person's view of his view of the issue, self, or other, and finds them to be different, this leads to feelings of being misunderstood by the other. It differs from actually being misunderstood in that it involves only one's perception of the other's view of one's view. It does not involve asking the other for his view as the former requires.
4. Failure of Realization of Understanding This results when one's perception of what the other thinks one thinks about an issue, self, or other does not agree with what the other actually thinks one thinks. In other words, have I understood what you think I think?

The above may seem like a great deal of double talk, yet is important to understand that conflict ensues not only as a result of merely not agreeing on something, but also as a result of perceptions of the other's

views. It may be entirely possible that we agree on something, but if I don't understand what your opinion or feelings are the conflict is still unresolved. It is also important to understand that conflict may result not only from views on issues, but also views of one's self and of the other in the relationship. These latter two are particularly important when considering conflict during periods of personal change as a result of a change in life stances. As one partner changes and begins to view him/herself differently, the other partner does not necessarily perceive any change or the same change.

In addition to levels of conflict, Guerney points out that conflict may take place in several situations. The first is when the issue at hand is directly salient to one of the partners but only indirectly salient to the other through his/her involvement with the first. Second, is the instance where both parties are directly involved, but the issue is one external to the relationship itself, such as planning a vacation or making the decision to move to a new location. The third involves the relationship itself as the issue. It is here that perceptions of self and other become involved most often. Statements like "you don't pay enough attention to me," are really saying, "I don't think you think I need more attention, but I think I do" (feeling misunderstood). Such distinctions may seem irrelevant, except to point out that it is the last which most often arises during periods of change, and which seems to be the most difficult to define and deal with as far as the participants are concerned. The former becomes most important when one is a helper in the negotiation process and is involved with relating to an issue of importance to the client or friend but not directly important to one's self. This does not mean that any or all three cannot arise in either role.

Modes of Expression in Conflict Situations

As was pointed out earlier, conflict negotiation in relationships involves participation by both parties involved. This means that not only must one be able to express what one is feeling or how one thinks about the issue, but also a willingness to allow the other person to do the same. The first instance is referred to as the expressor mode, the second the empathic mode. In any conflict situation one must be aware of the appropriateness of the use of either of the modes and a capacity to switch to the appropriate mode.

Either mode of expression involves a commitment to the relationship and the other person. If one is not concerned with a continuance in some form then the relationship is better ended. But if one is concerned, then these modes become appropriate methods of working out new vistas for the partners and developing the relationship into one which is workable and growthful.

In addition to this criteria, Egan has listed five others which he has found lend to the effectiveness of negotiation,

1. You should have an understanding of what you are like with others. This means realizing how you are likely to respond to others in characteristic interpersonal situations and what thoughts and feelings are likely to precede these reactions. It also means realizing how others are likely to react, think and feel toward you in such situations.
2. You should possess certain skills of expression and empathy.
3. You should be open to change aspects of yourself which seem unproductive for yourself or others.
4. You should have some idea of the areas in which you would like

to grow interpersonally.

5. You should be aware of and practice your own values.

Numbers one, three, four and five above involve personal introspection and cannot be dealt with in a paper of this nature. Only you can decide how you relate to others, judge your effectiveness, and set goals for change that are consistent with your own values and beliefs. There are no social science laws or theories that will do this for you. The second, however, can be learned and will be the focus of the rest of this paper.

Expressor Mode Skills

The purpose of the expressor mode is to allow one to express what his/her feelings, ideas, and perceptions of the situation are. It is important to remember that anything the expressor may say is a product of his/her own perceptual processes and that they do not necessarily represent things as they "really are" or as the other person sees them. Yet it is just these subjective statements on which one bases his/her own actions and interactions and therefore they are of primary importance. Notice that Laing's levels of interaction refer to the comparison of perceptions of the two persons involved, not one's perception of "reality."

There are several specific skills involved in the expressor mode (see appendix) but all involve the following actions. These guidelines have been set forth by Guerney.

1. Own your perceptions This means making statements in the form of "I think...," "I feel...," or "I believe..." Indicating to your partner verbally that what you are saying is your perception not only helps the other to see that you are speaking truthfully on the matter (who else can be more of an authority on your perceptions than you), but it also communicates to the other that you understand that his/her perceptions may be different and that

there is no right or wrong.

2. Identify your feelings This first means being in touch with your feelings, being able to identify them and label them. It, secondly, means being able to articulate them to the other person in such a manner as to relate them to the interaction. What is it that has resulted in your feeling this way?
3. State positive aspects of the situation While it is also important to be able to describe the negative aspects of the situation, it is also important to verbalize those aspects of the situation which are positive in nature. The fact that you agree on some aspect, that your intentions are the same, or that your feelings toward each other are mutual are all positive aspects which might be brought into the picture. This conveys to the person that although there are important aspects of the situation which are negative that is not all there is to the situation.
4. Describe the situation in behavioral terms What is it that the other person does that makes you angry, hurt, etc.? Make statements like "When you interrupt me, it hurts my feelings," rather than "I'm hurt."
5. Describe behavior which you wish to be conveyed If you are going to ask the other person to change in any way do so in behavioral terms. Tell them what it is you would like them to do. This does not mean that you can expect the other person to comply with your wishes. This merely serves the purpose of suggesting specific solutions to the problem and facilitates the conflict resolution process.

Empathic Mode Skills

For many the more difficult of the two modes is the empathic mode of expression. It involves the laying aside of one's perceptions for the moment and concentrating only on the other's perceptions, feelings and attitudes. It serves the purpose of creating an atmosphere that says to your partner that you respect and care for them and their views. It also serves to increase your understanding of the other's views which may, in some instances, resolve the conflict in and of itself should you find that the difficulties stem from your misunderstanding of their position. Guerney discusses the behaviors involved in this mode from a "don't" standpoint.

1. Don't ask questions This tells the other person that you were not listening or that you would like them to talk about something else. Allow the other person to decide what is important to say. Try not to direct them in any way. If something is unclear, communicate this by stating it.
2. Don't present your perceptions of the situation This is a switch to the expressor mode and removes the focus of the conversation from your partner.
3. Don't interpret things for your partner The idea here is to get your partner's view of the situation. Your interpretations may not be the same as has already been discussed.
4. Don't make suggestions or give advice Again this removes the focus of the conversation from your partner. In addition, the person may not wish to know how to handle the situation, but merely need to "talk it out."
5. Don't make judgments Accept what your partner has to say as true for him/her. Telling someone that they should not feel a certain way does not change the feeling and serves to close down the communication.

Above all the empathic mode deals with listening and communicating to the other that you are doing so. Physically this may be done through open body postures and eye contact. Verbally you can communicate this through the skills presented in the appendix.

Switching Modes

In most interpersonal situations each partner will fulfill both the expressor and empathic modes at least once and usually many times. This involves knowing when each is appropriate. The two conditions listed by Guerney for mode switching to be appropriate are when the expressor requests it and the other party agrees to it, or when the responder requests it and the expressor agrees providing the responder can make a statement about what the expressor has been saying that communicates understanding and acceptance of the expressor's statements.

As an expressor you would want to request a mode change under the following circumstances:

1. When you have finished expressing the major thoughts, feelings or suggestions and only points of elaboration remain.
2. When you want the other person's views, feelings or suggestions.

As a responder you may want to suggest a mode change when:

1. When you are satisfied that you understand the other's views, feelings, etc. and feel that you are covering old ground.
2. When your own thoughts or feelings are beginning to interfere with your ability to listen empathicly.
3. When you have information to present that may favorably influence the other's perception or lead to a solution to the problem.

In either case, the views of the expressor should be clearly understood by both partners before launching into the mode switch. Leaving

an issue before there is understanding merely creates a new level to the conflict.

Facilitation of Conflict

So far the discussion has focused on skills useful to a participant involved in the conflict. There are times when one finds him/herself in a situation where the conflict is between the person you are involved with and someone else. Whether this be a professional helper role or merely a friendship, the same skills apply. However, the empathic mode will often be a primary one for the helper while the expressor mode becomes secondary. A third mode sometimes enters into the situation however, what Guerney calls the facilitator mode, which involves the teaching of these skills to the other.

In order to take the responsibility of teaching one must first be confident in his/her own ability to function with these skills. This takes time and practice with others. Encounter groups or training groups are excellent places to get this sort of training since they focus specifically on these skills and provide feedback to your responses from several persons in any given situation. It is strongly recommended that the facilitator take part in such an activity before attempting to teach the skills to another. If such an experience is unavailable, it is a must that one receive evaluative feedback for another facilitator on one's competency.

As a facilitator, Guerney suggests that not only should one be able to exhibit the skills and provide information about them to others, but also during the interaction provide feedback to the student by:

1. Giving encouragement and praise either because the student has correctly adhered to the rules or because he/she has dealt with emotionally difficult material.

2. Make specific suggestions for phrasing.
3. Remind the person of the limitation of each mode when they have gone outside such limits.
4. Suggest mode switches when it seems appropriate.

None of the skills involved will guarantee that any conflict will be resolved. This is a function of the participants and the value they place on resolving the conflict when compared to what it would be like to remain unresolved. You cannot make a person continue a relationship if he/she does not want to, nor can you expect them to change to fit your expectations. These skills will serve to increase the chance for healthy communication about the problem and facilitate the reaching of a solution agreeable to both.

EXPRESSOR MODE SKILLS

Skill	Definition	Use	Procedure	Example
Describing Feelings	A sender statement that puts his or her emotional state into words.	For self-disclosure; to teach people how to treat you.	1. Get in touch with the feelings you are having. Identify them—hate? anger? joy? 2. Credit your feelings—make an "I" statement. 3. Make sure the statement contains an emotion. 4. Describe the specific cause of the feeling, if known.	"I'm depressed and discouraged because I didn't get the job." "I'm feeling very warm and loving toward you right now."
Describing Behavior	Accurately recounting specific observable actions of another without labeling the behavior as good or bad, right or wrong.	To create a supportive climate, to give helpful feedback, and to help support descriptions of feelings.	1. Observe the behavior. 2. Report only what you observed. 3. Refrain from judging the merit of the observation.	Instead of saying "She is such a snob," say "She has walked by us three times now without speaking."
Crediting Self—Making "I" Statements	Identifying *yourself* as the source of a particular idea or feeling.	To transmit information accurately, to help receiver fully understand, to avoid creating defensiveness, to acknowledge personal responsibility, and to avoid allness.	When an idea, an opinion, a feeling is *yours*, say so.	Instead of saying "Maury's is the best restaurant in town," say "*I* believe Maury's is the best restaurant in town."

Skill	Definition	Use	Procedure	Example
Feedback, Receiving	Creating a climate in which others feel comfortable giving you feedback.	To get information that will help you better understand yourself and your effect on others.	**1.** Ask for feedback only when you are really willing to hear it—outline what you are willing to hear feedback on. **2.** Avoid verbal-nonverbal contradictions. **3.** Paraphrase what you hear. **4.** Show others that you are appreciative of what they have told you.	Mary asks, "Tim, when I'm in a group do I talk too loud?" Tim replies, "Now that you mention it, Mary, you really do—and it's kind of embarrassing to me." "Thank you for being honest with me, Tim."
Provisionalism	A statement that reflects a tentative approach to a particular problem.	Allows you to express your opinion, but recognizes that others may have valid ideas; helps create or maintain a positive communication climate.	**1.** Consider what you are about to say. **2.** Determine whether it contains a wording that shows an attitude of finality, positiveness, or allness. **3.** If it does, add a qualifying statement that recognizes (a) that the statement is your opinion or (b) that the statement may not be entirely true or only true under these circumstances.	Instead of saying "That was a horrible movie," say "Others may have liked it, but I didn't care for it at all."

Skill	Definition	Use	Procedure	Example
Separating Fact from Inference	Being able to differentiate between a verifiable statement and a conclusion drawn from or about the phenomenon observed.	To avoid embarrassment, minor inconvenience, or serious problems resulting from behavior based on inferences rather than facts.	**1.** Determine if you are inferring or if you are reporting observation. **2.** Recognize that inference may not be true. **3.** Do not act on inferences as though they are facts.	Ted observes a truck with "Ace Plumbing" on the door parked in the drive next door, and says, "Looks like the Joneses got a problem." He pauses, and says, "Well, at least I'm inferring that the truck indicates some problem."
Self-disclosure	Sharing biographical data, personal ideas, and feelings that are unknown to the other person.	To create or maintain a positive communication climate.	**1.** Disclosure should be an acceptable risk. **2.** Should move to deeper levels. **3.** Should be part of an ongoing relationship. **4.** Should be reciprocal. **5.** Should consider receiver's ability to handle the disclosure.	May tells her current boy friend, "I've been engaged three times before."

EMPATHIC MODE SKILLS

Skill	Definition	Use	Procedure	Example
Listening (See also Paraphrasing, Supporting, Questioning, Interpreting, Evaluating.)	Making sense out of what you hear.	To receive oral communication.	**1.** Get ready to listen. **2.** Shift from speaker to listener completely. **3.** Listen actively. **4.** Withhold evaluation.	[Not applicable.]
Paraphrasing	Restatement of the content or intent of the sender's verbal message.	To increase listening efficiency; to avoid message confusion; to discover sender's motivation.	**1.** Actively listen to the message. **2.** Decode the message. **3.** Reencode the message into your own symbols. **4.** Try making your statement either more general or more specific than original.	**Julia:** "I saw the best movie—you have to see it." **Tony:** (content paraphrase) "I take it that you really like the plot." (intent paraphrase) "Sounds like the movie really made you happy."
Empathizing	Being able to detect and identify the the immediate affective state of another. Responding in an appropriate manner.	To create or to promote a supportive climate.	**1.** Listen actively to what the person is saying. **2.** Try to recall or to imagine what you would feel like under those same circumstances. **3.** Say something that indicates your sensitivity to those feelings.	When Jerry says "I really feel embarrassed about wearing braces in college," Mary empathizes and replies, "Yeah, I can understand that—I remember the things I had to put up with when I wore braces."

Skill	Definition	Use	Procedure	Example
Perception Checking	A verbal statement that tests your understanding of how another person feels.	To clarify the meaning of nonverbal behavior.	**1.** Watch the behavior of another. **2.** Decode perception. **3.** Ask yourself: what does that behavior mean to me? **4.** Choose appropriate symbols for encoding. **5.** Make sure encoding is descriptive.	**Gary:** "I think we should rent costumes for the party." **Allan:** (Knits his brows and frowns as Gary talks.) **Gary:** "I get the feeling that you are not pleased with the idea of renting costumes."
Supporting	Saying something that soothes, reduces tension, or pacifies.	To help the sender to feel better about himself or what he has said or done.	**1.** Actively listen to the message. **2.** Try to empathize with the person's feelings. **3.** Phrase a reply that confirms the person's right to these feelings.	"I'm so disappointed I didn't make the team." "I can understand that, you worked so hard."
Evaluating	Placing a value judgment on what has been said or done.	Limited to when another person asks for evaluation. Unsolicited evaluation can and often does cause defensiveness.	**1.** Make sure the context calls for or allows evaluation to be given. **2.** Precede a negative statement with a related positive one. **3.** Focus on only one behavior at a time. **4.** Include what the person can do to improve.	Instead of criticizing a speech by saying "That's a bad example, Joe" say, "Most of your supporting statements do the job, but that example doesn't develop the idea very clearly."

Skill	Definition	Use	Procedure	Example
Feedback, Giving	Responses to a person that provide that person with information about himself.	To give people new information about themselves. To help them see themselves as others see them.	1. Given only when the person indicates a readiness. 2. Should be positive as well as negative. 3. Should be specific rather than general. 4. Give the feedback at the earliest possible time. 5. Direct the feedback toward behavior a person can do something about. 6. Phrase feedback descriptively rather than evaluatively.	Carol says, "Bob, I've noticed something about your behavior with Jenny, would you like to hear it?" After Bob assures her that he would, she continues, "Well the last few times we've all been together, whenever Jenny starts to relate an experience, you interrupt her and finish telling the story."

reprinted from: Inter-Act: Using Interpersonal Communication Skills, by Kathleen S. Verderber and Rudolph F. Verderber, Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., Belmont, California, 1977.

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